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COOPERATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CHEMICAL INDUSTRY

Commission decision H (48)

Report by the Executive Secretary

1. Pursuant to paragraph 4 of decision H (48), the Working Party on the Chemical Industry at its third session discussed the progress made and future work related to the programme "Chemical Industry - Sustainable Economic and Ecological Development" (CHEMISEED), the follow-up activities to the High-Level Meeting on Cooperation and Sustainable Development in the Chemical Industry, held in Warsaw in March 1992.

2. The substantial use of chemicals is essential to achieve the social and economic goals of the world community. Chemicals help to meet mankind's basic needs and are of crucial importance for the manufacture of materials of all kinds, and today's best practice demonstrates that they can be widely used with a high degree of safety. Further sustainable development of the chemical industry, a common goal in economic and ecological development, is essential for improving environmental performance. The specific projects within the CHEMISEED programme address issues related to sustainable development - a guiding principle of ECE activities - and assistance to countries in transition. Furthermore, their results will contribute to the implementation of the recommendations of Chapter 19 of Agenda 21, as well as to the further development of the International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS).

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3. The Working Party, at its third session, discussed the project proposal and the feasibility study for the establishment of a Regional Environmental Management Centre for the Chemical Industry. This proposal was originally made by the Government of Poland at the High-Level Meeting on Cooperation and Sustainable Development in the Chemical Industry. In accordance with a decision taken at the second session of the Working Party, a Meeting of Experts was held in Warsaw in April 1993 in order to assist in the preparation of the project proposal and feasibility study. The Meeting agreed that the establishment of the Centre was justified and recommended that the Working Party take a decision as to its establishment. Taking into account the urgent need to improve the safety and environmental performance of the chemical industries in the economies in transition, the Meeting also agreed that those countries needed to be assisted in achieving this goal. Other recommendations of the Meeting are contained in document CHEM/AC.28/2.

4. The Working Party welcomed, in principle, the proposal of the Government of Poland to establish the Centre. There was considerable support for the proposal that the Centre be organized independently of ECE, possibly as a venture of the chemical industry, chemical industry associations, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and other interested parties. Interested parties were invited to consider assisting the Polish organizers to find appropriate funding for the Centre. The Working Party indicated its willingness to provide advice regarding the work of the Centre on a regular basis at its annual sessions.

5. The manufacture and use of chemicals can be potentially hazardous for the environment and human health. The chemical industry is aware that the protection of the environment is an integral part of good business practice and that chemical products should be manufactured, handled, transported, used and disposed of safely and without risk. Damage to human health and the environment have been common in some of the world's most important industrial areas. Restoration of the environment will require major investments and the development of new techniques. A great deal remains to be done in order to expand the environmentally sound management of hazardous chemicals and waste, and the use of chemicals in support of sustainable development. The economies in transition need to be assisted in tackling their major environmental problems including access to modern low- and non-waste technologies.

6. In this context, the Working Party supported the further development of the Pilot project demonstrating the environmental clean-up of selected chemical waste sites in each of the economies in transition in central and eastern Europe, which is also one of the follow-up activities to the High-level Meeting. The pilot project has been divided into two stages: the first stage will be to identify, prioritize and characterize several sites in each of the countries in transition. A technical report will be prepared on the basis of answers to a questionnaire; the second stage will be to seek interested parties to handle the demonstration clean-up procedure under financial arrangements to be negotiated.

7. A preliminary description of the suggested methods of work and a tentative timetable were outlined in document CHEM/AC.29/R.1. The Working Party has scheduled a Meeting of Experts on 2 March 1994, the task of which is to adopt a timetable and agree on a questionnaire for dissemination among the relevant countries.

8. The Working Party also supported further studies of chemical legislation in ECE member countries. At the suggestion of the Commission of the European Community, a comparative study in this field is being undertaken. Such a compendium would be a valuable tool for Governments, industry and researchers in both the developed market economies and the economies in transition, inasmuch as it would develop the understanding of chemical legislation and standards in the greater European space and assist the countries in transition with the implementation of west European levels of safety and pollution control in the chemical industry.

9. The first ad hoc Meeting for the preparation of this study is scheduled for 1 March 1994. In order to avoid duplication of work, the secretariat has requested organizations within the United Nations system and other international organizations to provide information about similar work already undertaken. A full report in that respect will be available at the Meeting.

10. The chemical industry, being a material- and energy-intensive sector, is concerned with the availability of these resources and their efficient use. The development of recycling technologies and the application of recycled materials are becoming essential factors. The chemical industry, through multi-stage processing, is adding value to energy and other raw materials and is determined to continue to optimize the use of these natural resources. A Seminar on the complex utilization of raw materials using advanced low- and non-waste process technologies will take place in Moscow in September 1995 at the invitation of the Government of the Russian Federation. The exact scope of the Seminar will be decided by a Preparatory Meeting to take place in 1994.

11. The Workshop on Waste Treatment in Industrial Parks, to be held in March 1994 in Istanbul (Turkey), is another project in the programme of work of the Working Party on the Chemical Industry which is related to sustainable development and will specifically address: the state-of-the-art of waste management in common waste treatment facilities for solid and liquid wastes; emissions into the atmosphere of an industrial park composed of different companies, such as small and medium-sized chemical companies and companies using considerable amounts of chemicals; and means to prevent and minimize the generation of waste, in particular hazardous wastes and their environmentally sound management through integrated life-cycle management.

12. The Working Party on the Chemical Industry is focusing its attention on crucial issues currently facing the chemical industry. As a new approach in its work, a round-table discussion on conditions for economic recovery and sustainable development in the chemical industry was organized within the framework of the Working Party's third session. The discussion focused mainly on issues related to the competitiveness of the European chemical industry, a topic which is currently at the top of the agenda in European economic circles. Similar discussions, involving industry, Governments and the international community, are planned in the future.

13. Other projects carried out under the auspices of the Working Party, such as The Chemical Industry: Annual Review and the Directory of Chemical Producers and Products are recognized sources of valuable information on the activities of the chemical industry and contribute substantially to promoting transparency and cooperation in this important industrial sector.

14. The Working Party on the Chemical Industry, as demonstrated by the High-level Meeting on Cooperation and Sustainable Development in the Chemical Industry, the CHEMISEED programme and the Round-table discussion, is a useful platform for further strengthening the partnership between industry, Governments and international organizations, which is a prerequisite for effectively promoting cooperation and sustainable industrial development in the ECE region.